

Twenty and a Kingdom

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Twenty and a Kingdom

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General Disclaimer: Danae and Maa-Br'ee are mine. Everything recognizable is not. A very warm thanks to whoever created Aurra Sing; she's quite a handful, but far too interesting to pass up as a character.

Specific Disclaimer: A rather lengthy interlude between "Of Medicine and Theater" and what will be coming next: a delightful excursion to Galeat. As per usual, all of my little scribbles are in a sort of chronological order, and they presume that the others have been read. I'll keep updating the timeline in my profile.

> Twenty and a Kingdom . . . <p>

Obi-Wan Kenobi watched his Master closely, trying to ascertain what approach Qui-Gon Jinn would use with the Council. The sun was reaching its zenith over Coruscant, but it failed to illuminate the Jedi's hooded face, even as he gazed out of the large windows of the foyer that led to the Council chamber. _They'll be displeased, but not that displeased. And hopefully he won't take it personally._

He knew that he would stay silent in the meeting; at seventeen, he was learning rapidly that it was better to do so. Qui-Gon always had a last-minute explanation for the peculiarities of their reports, and more than once he had rendered the situation awkward by blurting out a question. Master and Padawan were expected to tell the same tale, and dissension in regard to facts always led to protracted discussions. So he would remain silent, and agree when called upon to do so, and when it was over he would probably have yet another

mission to prepare for.

It wasn't such a bad routine, as routines went.

Qui-Gon suddenly began pacing around the hallway. "They are taking their time."

"Do you know who they're meeting with?"

"No." He shook his head, frowning at the closed doors to the Council's chamber. "Whoever it is, they were here long before we arrived."

Obi-Wan bit back a sigh. "Do you know what our next mission will be?"

He shook his head again. "There are several possibilities. Rest assured, Obi-Wan, we will not be in the Temple long."

"Was it always like this, Master?"

"Like what?"

"So . . . busy." Obi-Wan shrugged. "In the history books, it never seemed quite like this. The constant missions, the aid to the Republic."

"We've been helping the Republic ever since it began." Qui-Gon paused. "But it was not always like this. The Order is spread thin, my apprentice. And the Republic is rather voracious in its inclusion of new worlds."

Obi-Wan was about to reply when the doors slid open. Two robed figures were standing in the center of the circular room, bowing once before they turned and strode through the doors. The first one, as stout and round as a barrel, pushed past Qui-Gon without a word.

The second, slightly taller and far more slender, stopped as the doors closed behind it. Seemingly unaware of Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan, the hood shook from side to side. "Now where are you going?"

Obi-Wan's eyes grew large as he heard the female voice, filled with exasperation. "Danae?"

The hood turned at the sound of his voice. Two violet irises gleamed at him, their centers the color of dull gold, and a smile spread over full purple lips. A pale hand rose up and tugged the hood back, revealing a white face surrounded by short, purple-black waves.

"Well, this is the best thing that's happened to me in months." Her smile stretched into a delighted grin. "Maa-Br'ee! Look who else grew taller than you!"

In the middle of the hall, the stout figure was already turning around. Jehru Maa-Br'ee smiled as he registered the two Jedi, though lines of exhaustion were etched into the Corellian's face. "Qui-Gon," he said warmly, bowing. "And Obi-Wan Kenobi. It's been some time."

"Jehru," Qui-Gon replied, imitating the gesture. "All is well, I trust?"

Maa-Br'ee snorted. "They're not feeling very lenient, Qui-Gon. Watch yourself."

Obi-Wan couldn't stop staring at Danae. _She's older. But of course she's older, it's been a year at least. I haven't heard anything about her- never saw her after Canissa--I don't even know what she thought about that. What she thinks about it now. _

She sobered at the intensity of his gaze, her eyes flickering to Qui Gon, then back to him. "Will you be here long?" she asked softly.

It took him a moment to understand her words. "I don't know," he admitted. "We don't know what our next mission will be."

"Well, whatever happens, try to stop by after you meet with them." She shot a meaningful look at her Master. "I'll probably need a break. And it would be . . . nice."

"Uh, sure. Okay." He nodded quickly.

Maa-Br'ee cleared his throat. "You have a birthday meditation tomorrow . . . "

"It's your birthday tomorrow?"

She shrugged, a faint blush touching her cheeks. "You should remember that much, Padawan. I _am_ three years older than you."

"Two years, seven months, and twelve days," he corrected.

Qui-Gon chuckled. "You might as well round up, my apprentice."

He gave his Master a disapproving look before focusing on Danae. "How long will you be in the Temple for?"

She was about to reply when the doors to the Council chamber opened. Pulling her hood up again, she held up four fingers. "Your turn," she whispered.

Qui-Gon and Maa-Br'ee bowed once more to each other. As each party turned towards their destination, Obi-Wan couldn't help looking over his shoulder. The two robed figures were striding down the hall, Maa-Br'ee's hands gesturing angrily in the air. But he caught the briefest glimpse of Danae's face, glancing back at him, before the doors severed his line of sight.

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"Danae."

She looked up as Maa-Br'ee spoke. "What?"

"You're wearing a hole in the floor."

"Sorry." Danae glanced down. She had been pacing over the same stretch of her room for almost fifteen minutes, and she half-expected to see the marks of her feet in the smooth floor of the sleeping

chamber. A pile of data boards rose in a haphazard stack on the narrow desk, and Maa Br'ee was resting on her sleeping couch, scrolling through the latest reports of pirate attacks between the Core worlds and the Outer Rim.

He laid the data board down with a sigh and watched her for a moment. Though she had stopped pacing, her body was twitching with barely contained restlessness, arms folded in the plain shirt she had donned after tearing off her robe and tunic. "Their report will take some time," he pointed out. "And they might have other duties to attend to once they finish."

_Yes, but I haven't seen him in a year! Isn't that a duty of some kind? _"I know," she snapped. "As do we."

"Ye-es . . . " Maa-Br'ee rose and walked over to the window, gazing out at Coruscant. The afternoon sun cast a warm yellow light on the landscape, torching the endless lines of traffic into tiny dots of fire. The vehicles dotted the glass and metal towers with their shadows, echoing the deeper shadows that he knew lay far below. "Though I must admit I'm not looking forward to it."

Danae sighed deeply--_here we go again--_and moved next to him, resting her chin on his shoulder. Her eyes followed his, taking in the view with a single glance. "You sound tired," she said gently.

"No more than usual." He reached over, rubbing her head. "Age is quite an annoyance, my apprentice. If you're wise, you'll make the most of these years before it strikes you too."

"You're not that old."

"I'm old enough." His hand slid from her head to his own, feeling the bare skin of his head. "Though it was not my fate to grow the white hair to prove it."

"Are you still thinking about renting that farm?"

"It's a very enticing offer. A little garden, trees, a quiet space . . ."

"It's on Dalastine," she muttered irritably. "You once said you'd rather shoot yourself in the foot than be forced to live on Dalastine."

He chuckled. "I'm surprised you remember. That was years ago."

"But you did say it."

"Age has an uncanny manner of softening dislike, as well as being annoying."

"You're serious about this, aren't you?"

"I've decided, actually. I need to make arrangements with Trav soon." He smiled at the thought. "If the Council approves my request, then I can do it after this next mission. And it would be a good place for you to spend your last few years. You always said you wished we had a home of some sort, a place to return to other than the

Temple."

Last few years? She shook her head, her chin rubbing into the fabric of his robe. "I'm nowhere near ready, Maa-Br'ee."

He turned, forcing her head off his shoulder. "You're a lot closer than you realize," he said quietly.

"No, I'm not." She frowned. "The Code says . . . "

"The Code is the summation of a path, Danae." He squeezed her arms, holding her gaze with his own. "There are thousands of Jedi who have passed their trials. Do you honestly believe they never experience passion? Never feel anger? The trials signify that you are on the path to oneness with the Force, and can wield it accordingly. But that is all."

"That's not what Master Yoda says. Master Yoda says--"

"Master Yoda has hundreds of years on us," Maa-Br'ee interrupted. "Plenty of time to move far along on his own path, and enough time to forget that some of us still lag behind."

"Maybe you should tell him that?"

"If he objects to your trials when the time comes, I most certainly will. But he won't object. He will know it is your time, as surely as I know it's coming."

Danae looked at him uneasily. "I'm only twenty, Maa-Br'ee."

"Nineteen," he corrected. "You'll be twenty tomorrow. Today, you are nineteen."

She sighed. _He's being stubborn. I can't argue with him when he's being stubborn._ "So what's my present, again?"

"It is a beautiful secret, my apprentice."

"Beautiful?"

He grinned. "Its beauty lies in its ability to annoy you."

"Ugh." She threw up her hands. "We go through this every year--"

"Only because you start guessing every year, tormenting yourself for weeks, asking endless questions that I will never answer."

"You could give me a hint."

"No, I cannot."

Danae groaned. "Fine, fine. So what am I supposed to do while I wait for this Padawan of Qui-Gon's?"

"That, Danae, you will have to figure out for yourself." Maa-Br'ee yawned. "I need to rest, and your impatience is preventing that from occurring."

"You do remember that you have a room of your own next door?"

"The way you've been knocking about, they can probably hear you in the Senate," he retorted.

Her nose wrinkled. "I don't weigh enough to make that much noise."

"You'd be surprised." He turned her shoulders and pointed to the door. "Go on. Amuse yourself in some fashion, preferably one that does not disturb half the Jedi in the Temple."

"Maa-Br'ee . . . "

But her Master pushed her roughly to the door. "Go on," he repeated. "Have fun. I'll see you in the morning."

Danae sighed and opened the door. As it slid into the wall, a smile suddenly broke over her face. "Morning?"

"I'd be a fool to think otherwise." He reached for the panel, but hesitated. "And I don't want to hear about any trouble, Danae. No irate Qui-Gon coming to wake me up, no Council demands for explanations--"

"Duly noted," she replied pertly.

"Just stay out of everyone's way. That's an order."

Her eyebrow arched. "You want me to avoid the entire population of Coruscant?"

"What a marvellous idea," Maa-Br'ee said with barely concealed delight. "That's exactly what I want you to do. Stay out of everyone's way." He grinned at her again. "But don't forget to have fun, and if you end up at Arbe, say hello for me. Now goodnight, and go."

She pouted as the door closed in her face. So what am I supposed to do?

Groaning inwardly, she turned and began plodding towards the library.

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 Obi-Wan Kenobi strode happily through the Coruscant streets, his eyes scouring the shops on either side. The meeting had ended rather quickly--best thing that's happened to me in months--leaving him an hour before the stores began to close. He barely noticed the crowds that pressed around him, the occasional curious glance at the dark brown robes he wore. His beltpack was bulging with credits, and he had a very personal mission to accomplish.

His eyes finally lit upon a window and he ducked inside, making his way to the counter in the back. There, he surveyed the contents of the glass case, nodding in satisfaction at a particular item on the bottom shelf. It's perfect. At least, I think it's perfect.
Hopefully it's perfect.

He knelt and tapped the glass. "How much?"

The storekeeper leaned over, stroking his beard thoughtfully. "It's open to negotiation."

They bartered for a few minutes, until the sense of wasting time was more than Obi-Wan could bear. He quickly paid and left, shoving the tiny package deep into the pockets of his robe. He could have worked the price lower, but the light was beginning to grow dim, and he had an appointment to keep.

He stopped once more on his way back to the Temple, pausing at a flower stand. There he bought a single blossom, the violet hue of the petals making him smile broadly. _Well, this at least is perfect. I think. Maybe. _Thus prepared, he hurried back to the Temple, aiming for the spire which rose delicately towards the deepening blue sky, an anomaly among the solid towers that characterized Coruscant's architecture.

He didn't stop at his own rooms, but rushed down the corridor until he reached another. Quickly he knocked, holding the blossom behind his back.

The door opened to reveal a sleepy Jehru Maa-Br'ee. Obi-Wan blushed furiously. "I'm sorry, Sir--"

"Obi-Wan Kenobi." The Master's tone was one of mock reproof. "How many times do I have to tell you? My name is Maa-Br'ee. Not Sir, or Master. Just Maa-Br'ee is more than adequate."

"I'm sorry, Maa-Br'ee--"

"She's not here." Maa-Br'ee grinned at the Padawan's obvious consternation. "Considering how she was tormenting me with her pacing, I told her to go somewhere else."

Obi-Wan felt more confused. "Pacing?"

"Waiting for you, of course. She hasn't been able to stop moving all afternoon. All nerves. You've undone seven years of training in patience." He wagged a finger in the apprentice's face. "At this rate, I'll have to put her back on the droids."

"Yes!" he nearly shouted, then quieted himself. "I mean, I'm sorry, Sir. Maa-Br'ee."

"As well you should be." Maa-Br'ee pointed to his arm. "What are you hiding there?"

Sheepishly, Obi-Wan held out the flower.

Maa-Br'ee snorted. "Very nice. And I'm obviously not going to see her tonight. Just be sure--" he jabbed his finger at Obi-Wan again-- "that she's back here by morning. She has a birthday meditation to perform, young man, and I will be very displeased if she's too tired to complete it."

"Yes, Maa-Br'ee," he said quickly.

"And you might want to change that tunic of yours."

Obi-Wan looked down at himself. "But I already did--"

"It's not a question of cleanliness," Maa-Br'ee said patiently. "She'll explain. But I think you would do well to put on something a little less conspicuous."

"Right." _Less conspicuous? What does that mean?_ "I--I guess I should go do that, then."

"She's around somewhere. Try the library first." The Jedi smiled. "And have fun, Obi-Wan. Make sure she does as well."

"Yes, Maa-Br'ee."

"Well, go on, then." Maa-Br'ee shut the door in Obi-Wan's face.

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Danae's brow furrowed as she turned the pages of the book. She was curled up in a corner chair of the Temple library, and while she knew the stories had already been transferred into computer files for easier access, she preferred the bound treatises that had served for so long as the backbone of Jedi history. When she was little, Maa-Br'ee had read to her nightly from Jedi lore, regaling her with tales of the rise and fall of the Sith, the struggles of the Jedi in their wars against the Dark Lords, and the birth of the Republic. And it was now, in a last attempt to quiet her impatience and nervousness, that she returned to them.

Her fingers caressed the pages as she read on, immersing herself in words she had nearly forgotten, smiling as she discovered a familiar phrase or scene. So wrapped up was she in the text that she never noticed the presence who entered the library slowly, cutting around the reading tables and past the bank of terminals to edge up behind her. An arm slid around her head, and as she gasped, startled, a flower dropped onto the open book.

She dropped the page and slid her fingers around the stem. _It's beautiful. No one has ever done this for me before._ She raised it briefly to her nose, then slid the petals over her lips, smiling at the soft texture. When she looked up, her eyes were shining.

Obi-Wan's face gazed at her, floating upside down over her own. "Am I interrupting?"

"Never."

He hesitated for a moment, then bent over, kissing the tip of her nose. She giggled at the sensation and grabbed the back of his head, guiding his mouth against her own. He smiled as her lips parted, their tongues touching briefly, the slightest teasing gesture that left him weak in the knees.

In compensation he dropped into a crouch behind her chair, sliding his arms around her shoulders. He let his hands just barely graze her breasts before they locked together, resting against her stomach. "So what are you reading?" he murmured.

"History." She angled her head until their eyes met.

"Jedi aren't supposed to hold onto the past."

"Wise counsel indeed, when the present is so much more interesting."

His blue eyes were shining. _It feels like we were never separated._
"So what do you want to do?"

"I see that you ran into Maa-Br'ee." Her fingers tugged gently at the sleeve of his plain shirt.

"That doesn't answer my question."

"How long do you have?"

He rested his head against her shoulder, the hint of a smirk visible on his lips. "Well, let's see, now. We're being sent to Ryloth first, and then possibly Galeat afterwards, which means I have two sets of reports to review . . . "

"That doesn't answer_ my_ question," she chided.

"You first."

"My answer depends on yours."

He kissed her neck. "I believe the understanding is that I deliver you into Maa-Br'ee's hands in the morning, and then begin my own work."

"Deliver me?" Her eyebrow arched. "Who is to say I won't be delivering you?"

"That depends on what we do," he replied innocently.

"Hmm." She stretched her arms wide, one hand reaching up to play with his hair. "How about a little trip?"

"Where to?"

"Out there . . . " she waved her other hand airily in the direction of the windows.

"For what reason?"

"For theater." Danae closed her eyes, savoring the word. "Maa-Br'ee knows the manager of Arbe Theater. And tonight is the last performance of a very good play."

"Sounds interesting." _Although it wasn't quite what I had in mind._

"Trust me, Obi-Wan."

"Always," he said seriously.

She eased his arms away and rose, shutting the book. The flower dangled from one hand as she put the book back on its shelf, then turned to him. "Shall we go?"

He bowed and swung his arm grandly in the direction of the door.
"Birthdays first."
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Obi-Wan halted at the balcony railing, looking over the interior of Arbe Theater. The space had been constructed in the manner of a tall cylinder, no more than three dozen rows of benches wrapping around an oval stage set against the curved wall, with two levels of balconies. He had never been in a theater before, and noted with interest the curtains that just touched the stage floor, the way the balconies had been constructed into partially enclosed booths. Their own was filled only with a large couch, angled towards the stage, and a small table in one corner.

Danae came up behind him, one hand resting lightly on his back. "We lucked out with the balcony," she murmured. "Seems that its usual occupant declined for tonight."

"Who usually occupies it?"

"Some Senator or other." She pointed out into the middle of the room. "They hollowed the space out from the tower's basement, digging into the lower levels to get enough height. It's probably the furthest down anyone has ever been in Coruscant."

He glanced at her, about to respond, then grinned. She had trimmed the stem of the flower and tucked it behind her ear. "You really like it?"

"It's beautiful." She kissed his cheek. "Thank you, if I forgot to say it earlier."

"Anytime--"

"I know, Obi-Wan. I remember Canissa."

"I didn't know if you would," he said softly.

"How could I forget?" Her eyebrow arched. "I was sore for a week."

The immediate flush that burst forth in his cheeks made her laugh. "I didn't realize I hurt you," he said uneasily.

"Neither did I, at the time," she replied with a smile. "But I was rather distracted."

In response he sat down on the couch, suddenly feeling very nervous again. His eyes widened as he realized the couch was higher than usual. _Oh, right. Need to see the stage, of course._ "It wasn't too bad?" he asked hopefully.

She burst out laughing again and flopped down next to him. As if of one mind, he settled against the arm of the couch and she leaned against him, pulling his arm over her chest. He waited patiently for her giggles to subside, then repeated tentatively, "It was alright?"

"It was wonderful, Obi-Wan." She squeezed his arm. "But I promise

next time I'll be more vocal in my appreciation, so you'll know."

Next time? He looked down at her head. "What do you mean?"

"Patience, Padawan," she replied. "Listen. They're letting the audience in."

He caught the rising murmur of footsteps and voices somewhere outside the theater. Craning his neck over the edge, he saw a myriad of beings filing into the benches, with smaller groups suddenly appearing in the balconies. "Why did we come in earlier?"

"Because I'm under strict orders not to interact with anyone." She sighed. "Maa-Br'ee seems convinced that I cannot leave the Temple without getting into trouble."

"Because of that time you told me about? With the other Padawan?"

She tensed for a second. "Huh. I had forgotten I told you about that."

"Sorry," he murmured.

"No, it's fine. I guess that's why. Maa-Br'ee and I haven't talked about it in a while, though."

"Shouldn't you?" He looked down at her head again, suddenly worried. "What if it's true?"

"Only time will tell."

"But you should do something about it."

"There's nothing to do, Obi-Wan." She looked up at him. "Trust me. I'm aware of the possibilities. But there's nothing I can do about it now."

"I heard--"

"Hush." She pressed her fingers against his lips. "I don't want to know, Obi-Wan. And the play's about to begin."

He frowned at her hair. _I heard she had killed a Jedi. Qui-Gon knew her, she had left the Order to devote herself to meditation. And she was murdered by Aurra Sing._

But the curtains were rising, and the roar of applause made him focus on the stage.

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 "Who's that?"

Danae sighed. "That, Obi-Wan, is the princess' sister. She was the one standing in the back in the first scene."

"Oh." He leaned forward, completely enraptured. Two hours had slipped by and he hadn't noticed, caught up in the endlessly complicating

plot. "And she objects to the marriage? I thought the queen mother had approved it before she was poisoned."

"Pay attention, Obi-Wan."

He nodded absently, his eyes locked on the stage. The taller woman strode on, gesturing violently to the two young lovers on stage. She denounced them in no uncertain terms, garnering a round of disapproving comments from the audience. The princess, clinging to her prince, began arguing back, and was rewarded with scattered applause.

"But what will they do?" Obi-Wan shook his head. "His father has already objected, and if both families won't approve--"

"Just keep watching," she interrupted.

The two women became more violent in their argument. Each was soon calling the other names, and a round of hair-pulling ensued, while the hapless prince tried desperately to separate them. A Human woman stood up in the audience. "Scratch her eyes out!" she called excitedly.

"Be quiet," Obi-Wan muttered.

Danae, still nestled in her arms, shook her head ruefully. "They always like this part," she whispered.

"It's horrible. They're hurting each other."

As sometimes sisters are destined to do, even if not bound by blood. "Just watch," she repeated.

The prince finally succeeded in dragging his beloved to the side. Still shaking with fury, she tore off her crown and flung it onto the stage, loudly renouncing her birthright to be with the prince. The crowd whistled and cheered as the older princess slowly picked up the crown, then crushed it in her hands.

But just as it seemed that the situation had been resolved, the prince's father suddenly appeared on stage, followed by a young boy and a row of troops. Clad in all-black, his ominous presence caused silence to fall over the audience.

Danae sat up, startled. "What are they doing?"

"What's wrong?" Obi-Wan curled around her again, resting his head on her shoulder.

"This isn't how it goes," she murmured. "The king comes on alone."

In somber tones, the king demanded that the two princesses approach him. They did so uneasily, the prince clinging to his beloved until the last possible moment. With a rough gesture, the king reached forward and pulled off the women's faces, the soft masks falling to the ground.

"What's going on?" Danae's voice was low, urgent.

The two princesses turned to the audience. Everyone gasped. Each was revealed as the other, facing the audience with empty gazes. The king reached around again and pulled off another pair of masks. Beneath the second layer the two women's faces were perfectly blank, only the faintest hint of mouth and eyes in an otherwise sheer visage.

Obi-Wan shuddered. "How did they do that?"

"I don't know. I don't understand--"

But the king had begun speaking. Gesturing to the two princesses, he denounced them both as a threat to his kingdom. The love of his son for the younger created a liason to a family that was looking for war, he declared. And because of that love, older and younger were equivalent, for the bond of sisters can never be severed. With a single, eloquent gesture, he ordered his troops to kill them both.

As the soldiers began to advance, the two blank faces looked at each other. They seized each other's hands briefly, then raised their arms to the ceiling. And both suddenly disappeared.

The king went into a frenzy, ordering them found and arrested immediately. The troops scattered offstage, presumably to hunt the two princesses. Then the king turned to the prince. In booming tones, he exiled the young man forever. One hand dropped to the boy by his side, and the king deigned him heir to his kingdom.

The curtain dropped.

Danae hunched over on the couch. _I think I'm going to throw up._

"That wasn't right," Obi-Wan said after a moment. "It felt wrong."

"No, it wasn't," she managed, gasping. "That's not the way it ends."

"Are you alright?" He bent over her, trying to grasp her face.

"Yes. It just startled me." She sat up again, taking a deep breath. "The last time I saw it performed, the king comes on alone. The prince renounces his own birthright and he flees with the princess. The king and the older princess are left to realize how much they've lost in their blindness, and decide to join forces in finding the exiled lovers."

"So why did they change it?"

"I don't know." She took another breath. "I think I need to get out of here."

He rose automatically, helping her up. They slipped past the crowds milling about in the halls, holding each other's hand tightly. When they made it into the cool night air Obi-Wan didn't stop moving, pulling Danae along until they finally reached an empty air taxi platform.

She sat down on a bench, holding her head in her hands. After a moment's hesitation, he sat down beside her, rubbing her back. "It's just a play," he said gently.

"I know. But it felt so strange . . . " she shook her head against her palms.

"What do you think it means?"

Danae leaned against him. "I'm not sure I want to know," she said quietly. One hand rose up to rub absently at her head. "_Sma._ I think I dropped the flower--"

"There might be nothing to it." He slipped his arm around her shoulders, squeezing them in reassurance.

"There shouldn't be anything to it. But that's not what it feels like, somehow." Her face broke into a wan smile. "Remind me to tell Maa-Br'ee I agree with him."

"About what?"

"He wants to rent a house on Dalastine. On the edge of a farm that Bavu's cousin runs."

"I didn't know Bavu had a cousin."

"Neither did we, until a few months ago." She shrugged. "His name is Trav. Nice person, willing to work out an agreeement. And Maa-Br'ee wants to have a home of some sort, for the first time in his life."

"So you agree with him?" Somehow, Obi-Wan felt both pleased and bothered at once. _She'd be there most of the time, then. Almost never at the Temple._

"I didn't when he first mentioned it. He's been going on and on about how he's getting old and I'm nearing my trials. Which has been bothersome enough, but Dalastine is also incredibly small and boring. Not even a real market, just a few spaceports and a lot of farms. Now, though--" she shook her head, her gaze focused on the Coruscant skyline. "Every time we come back, it feels worse here, somehow. As if everyone knows something we do not. And I'm not sure how much I like it."

Obi-Wan was silent for a moment. "I've sensed it too," he finally whispered.

She sat up, staring at him. "What do you mean?"

"It wasn't until this year," he said slowly. "But everyone we speak with seems to be masked, like the play. I'm not sure how to explain it."

"As if they're speaking with another voice?"

"Yes, in a way." He shook his head. "But it's more than that, somehow."

"Something elusive."

"Yes. Just on the edges--" he waved his hand vaguely in the air.

"And when you sense it, you try to focus on it, but it never becomes clear."

Obi-Wan nodded. "I wasn't sure what to think of it. When we return, we're rarely here for more than a week."

She closed her eyes. _Too much. Always too much. The strangeness is everywhere now, I can't shake it, and now Maa-Br'ee's talking about my trials--it's just too soon--_

"Danae?"

"Sorry," she murmured, opening her eyes once more. "I'm not sure what you should think about it. I just don't have any answers."

"Maybe I do," he said hesitantly. His hands were shaking as he reached into his pocket, feeling around for the small, wrapped package. "It is your birthday, after all. And we should be focusing on that."

"It's not--" her eyes widened as he held out the tiny square. "What have you done?"

"Nothing, really." He took a deep breath. "I just thought you should have a birthday present."

Slowly, her fingers trembling slightly, she began to unwrap the package, still resting in his outstretched hand. The paper fell away, its torn pieces scattering in the air. As she pried open the slender box, he found himself staring at her, watching her face for a reaction, and quickly turned his gaze to the skyline. _If she doesn't like it . . . _

He kept his gaze averted as she carefully lifted out the chain. It was short, more choker than necklace, fashioned of cast silver links that fastened with a thick clasp. In the center was a single stone, a circle of solid violet shot through with a delicate blue vein that bisected it.

She cradled it in her palm, staring at it. _It feels so right. Like him._

Her gaze lifted to him, and she held in a giggle at the utter tension in his face. _And his nervousness only makes it moreso._
"Obi-Wan."

Slowly he turned to face her. "If it's not right, you don't have to--"

In response, she flung her arms around him and kissed him.

* * * * *

Obi-Wan's eyes opened, shut, then opened again. It took him a moment to orient himself, shifting slightly on the narrow sleeping couch. _My room. At the Temple._ His arm was resting against a bare back,

and he smiled down at the tousled purple-black hair.

Danae lay in his arms, her head nestled in the crook of his shoulder. Moving carefully, he leaned over and kissed her head. As her eyes opened sleepily, registering his face, she smiled back. Her hand reached up for a moment, a thumb running lazily over his lower lip, then she snuggled back down with an exaggerated sigh of contentment.

"Happy birthday," he said softly.

"Mmm." Her head turned slightly, flexing her neck. The choker gleamed around her throat. "Happy indeed."

"So it was--"

She pressed her hand over his mouth again. "Words cannot describe, Obi-Wan Kenobi."

He grinned and kissed her palm, then wiggled down next to her. The next few minutes were lost in a very gradual awakening.

Finally Danae stretched, giggling as his mouth dropped to her chest. "Don't start something you cannot finish, Padawan."

He paused, kissing her breast before looking up at her. "Consider it a future enticement?"

"I already have plenty."

With a sigh, he rolled over, pushing her onto her back. "And I'm supposed to go to Ryloth tomorrow," he muttered irritably.

She stretched again beneath him, one arm looping down around his neck. "The trials of being Jedi apprentices."

"Someday . . . " he shook his head.

". . . we will work out a better arrangement for this," she finished. "It's not as far off as it seems."

"It's long enough." He kissed her lips, then her neck. "I don't know when I'll see you again," he whispered.

"We seem to have a knack for running into each other."

"Not that I'm complaining, but once a year isn't what I'd call a knack."

"Well, if Maa-Br'ee gets his wish, I'll be mostly on Dalastine for the next few years." She rubbed his head. "So we'll just have to coax Qui-Gon into a nice, long visit."

"If we do come, I'll make you dinner."

She stared at him for a moment, then burst out laughing.

"What?" He rose up on one elbow, looking at her curiously. "What's wrong with dinner?"

"You want to make me dinner."

"Why not?"

She shook her head. "No one has ever offered to make me dinner before."

"I should hope not," he retorted.

That made her laugh more. He sighed and sat back on his heels, watching as her whole body shook beneath him. "You're always laughing at me."

"It's not--" she wiped her eyes, gasping-- "it's not you. It's just the way you make these offers in such circumstances--"

"What's wrong with my offer?" He folded his arms.

She propped herself on one elbow, a bare arm reaching towards him. "Come here."

His eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"So I can show you exactly what I think of your offer."

As she pulled him back down on the sleeping couch, he began to smile.

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Maa-Br'ee tapped his foot impatiently, one eye tracking the sun which was steadily rising over Coruscant. He paced to the far end of his apprentice's room, then to the door again, then turned to the window once more. His face broke into a scowl, but just when he was about to leave to visit a certain Padawan's room, the door opened.

"Good morning!" Danae burst in, her hair matted and tousled. Her shirt was heavily creased, and a few red marks dotted her neck. She flung her arms around him, hugged him, then began awkwardly fumbling with the buckles on her boots. "So it's time to meditate, correct?"

Maa-Br'ee stared at her, his arms hanging limply at his sides.

"Birthday meditation?" She waved a hand in his face, balancing on one foot while she tugged the other free. "This morning? Wasn't that what you said?"

Finally he shook his head at her. "Truly remarkable."

"What?" Kicking her boots aside, she frowned at him. "What's wrong?"

"You're out of bed." He began chuckling. "It's not even the height of the day, and you're not only out of bed, you're actually awake."

"Of course I'm awake."

"Considering how many times I've had to drag you out of bed, Qui Gon's Padawan must be a magician."

Danae smiled coyly. "He has a few talents."

"As I can see from the injuries you've sustained." He reached over, brushing the chain that rested against her throat. "Present, I assume?"

"Yes." She craned her head around, trying hopelessly to see her own neck. "Almost too right, don't you think?"

"It is well chosen." Maa-Br'ee grinned at her. "I feel cheap in comparison."

"You're never cheap, Maa-Br'ee. You spend dataries better than a Senator's wife."

He snorted. "Perhaps I missed my calling?"

"So am I to meditate?"

"Most certainly. But first I have a little something of my own." He waved a hand airily. "I'll be right back."

As he slipped into the hallway, Danae sighed and sat down on her sleeping couch, her thighs flexing in discomfort._ Obi-Wan got a little carried away again. I probably won't be able to stand after meditation._

The thought of just how she had gained the ache in her thighs made her smile. But before she could ruminate on the previous evening Maa Br'ee reappeared.

"Here." He held out a large, rectangular object, wrapped in paper. "Happy birthday, Danae."

She looked at it curiously, then took it from him, dropping the heavy weight into her lap. Quickly she tore off the paper, then stared at it for a long moment, her hands shaking as she touched the tanned hide. When her eyes met Maa-Br'ee's steady gaze they were brimming.

"How did you ever find this?"

"If you cry, I'll be displeased," he admonished. "I've been asking around for some time, ever since I heard they had printed a few. I had hoped to have it for you last year, but it took longer than I thought to secure a copy."

She looked down again at the worn book in her lap, the thick binding cracking with age. A tear slid down her cheek as she ran a finger over the etched letters on the cover:

>
 Field Dictionary, Volume N451
> Provissian-Basic
 Basic-Provissian

"It's impossible." She sniffled, wiping at her nose roughly with the back of her hand. "I didn't think they had that much contact with the Republic--"

"It's standard practice for survey teams to assemble a translation manual," Maa-Br'ee said softly. "I actually first thought of it when

I took you as my Padawan, but for many years I couldn't even determine if it had ever been written, much less printed."

Her hands kept trembling as she opened it, flipping through the pages until she found the entry for "balance." Her mother's name was written next to it, the familiarity of the cursive symbols almost more than she could bear.

Quickly she put it down and ran up to him, hugging him tightly. "Thank you," she whispered, her voice choking. "Thank you so much--"

"Hush," he whispered gruffly. "You'll never be able to meditate if you keep this up."

But he held her as she burst into tears against his robe.
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Obi-Wan stumbled towards the Temple entrance, half-dazed from his early awakening. His mind had divided completely in two. One half was processing the endless reports he had spent the previous day reviewing, having had the misfortune to run into Qui-Gon and an armful of data boards the minute he left his room. The other half was still asleep. Somewhere between the two lay the awareness that his back still ached, and he had to remember to keep his tunic closed lest his Master spotted the large red mark that was still visible on his collarbone.

Next to him, Qui-Gon grasped his shoulder, steering him away from the sudden obstacle of a wall. "You can sleep more once we get to the freighter," he said softly. "It will be a long journey to Ryloth."

"Yes, Master." His eyelids began to droop, and he forced them open again. _Just make it to the freighter. Just to the freighter._

They stepped out into the chill grey dawn of Coruscant, the rising sun just beginning to touch the buildings with its light. As they began heading towards the waiting air taxi, a shout behind them made both turn around.

Obi-Wan squinted at the running figure. A Docent rushed up, gasping. "For you," she said breathlessly, pressing a small envelope into Obi-Wan's hand. "I apologize for not bringing it by last night."

"It's okay," he mumbled, looking in confusion at the envelope. His name was written on it, but he didn't recognize the handwriting. There was a small lump inside, and for a moment he panicked. _She didn't like it after all--_

He looked up again, but the Docent had already left. With a trembling hand, he opened the envelope and pried out the note inside.

_Obi-Wan, _

_ Supposed to be meditating, but I couldn't stop thinking about our knack (or lack thereof.) I got this from a friend on Tatooine. It's supposed to bring its owner luck. So I'm letting you borrow it, with

the understanding that you'll return it to me the next time we see each other. Thus you can have no excuses._

_ Danae _

>
 He read it through twice, then looked inside the envelope again. A tiny stone cube was wedged inside, carved with symbols he didn't recognize. As his fingers brushed it, he felt a twinge of Force resonance, as much a representation of its sender as her voice or image.

Qui-Gon cleared his throat. "All is well, I assume?"

"Yes, Master." Quickly he pushed the envelope and note into his pocket.

They turned and began striding towards the air taxi. Qui-Gon glanced down curiously. "How did you celebrate Danae's birthday, after all?"

A smile spread over his Padawan's features. "We spent it together, Master."

"What did you do?"

"Went to the theater, came back . . . " he waved his hand vaguely.

"It's a shame that our paths do not cross more often."

"It's alright," Obi-Wan said softly. "It will happen."

Qui-Gon glanced at him again, then shrugged. Side by side, they entered the air taxi. In a few minutes, they had reached the landing platform, where the freighter to Ryloth was waiting.

> Finis <fido> <fido>

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file.